

- ² Sage, Bryan L. "Comments on the Relationship of some Ducks in the Genus *Aythya* Boie" Bull. B.O.C. Vol. 75, pp. 53-4. 1955.
- ³ Gillham, E. H. "Field Notes on the White Feathering at the Base of the Bill and White Under-tail Coverts in the Tufted Duck" British Birds, Vol. L, pp. 389-392. 1957.
- ⁴ Gillham, E. H. "Variations of plumage colouration in the Pochard *Aythya ferina* and the Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*" Bull. B.O.C., Vol. 79, pp. 87-8. 1959.

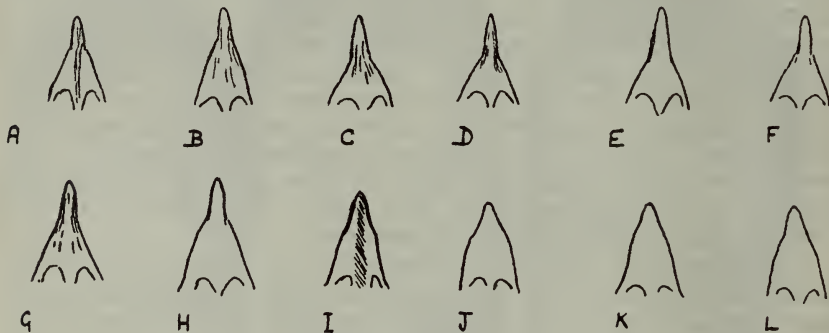
Some Taxonomic Characteristics of the genus *Lagonosticta*

by MR. C. J. O. HARRISON

Received 18th September, 1959

INTRODUCTION.

Within the estrildine waxbills it is comparatively easy to recognise the existence of the genus *Lagonosticta*, the Fire-finches, but it is difficult to find a series of taxonomic characteristics which are common to all the species which comprise it, and will separate them from those of other genera. I have previously examined the behavioural characteristics of some of these species and have come to the conclusion that the Lavender Finch, *caerulescens*, is not a member of this genus and has erroneously been placed in it (Harrison 1956).



Bills of some waxbills viewed from above. (Approx. x2)

A. *L. senegala*
E. *L. rubricata*
I. *L. rufopicta*

B. *L. nigricollis*
F. *L. jamesoni*
J. *E. perreini*

C. *L. larvata*
G. *L. landanae*
K. *E. caerulescens*

D. *L. vinacea*
H. *L. rara*
L. *E. eelpoda*

CHARACTERISTICS

If we remove the Lavender Finches we can begin by saying that *Lagonosticta* tend to be squat, ground-feeding waxbills and usually lack the gregarious tendencies of the genus *Estrilda*. In addition to the general plumage pattern two characteristics which have been used to separate these species are the possession of a slight lateral compression of the bill and the presence of small white dots on the sides. To this I should like to add the possession a distinct coloured eye-rim.

1. Plumage.

If the general plumage pattern of the Fire-finches is examined two different groups are apparent. In the first the species have a mainly red

and brown colouration with a red rump and red-and-black tail. It comprises *senegala*, *landanae*, *rara*, *rufopicta*, *nitidula*, *jamesoni*, and *rubricata*. *Nitidula* is peculiar in that it lacks the red on rump and tail, but it is characterised by a general absence of the red pigment so apparent in the others which is here only present as a vinous patch on the upper breast. There is some sexual dimorphism in all species except *rufopicta* and *nitidula*.

In the second group the plumage is grey or vinous-red, with scarlet rump and tail. The cock has a black facial mask. There are three species, *vinacea*, *larvata*, and *nigricollis*.

The difference between these two groups is greater than that between the latter group and the two Lavender Finches, one of which (*caerulescens*) is grey with scarlet rump, tail-coverts, and tail, while the other (*perreini*) is similar but has a black tail.

2. Bill Compression.

With the exception of *rufopicta* the bills of all the Fire-finches possess a distinct lateral compression half-way, or two-thirds of the way, between base and tip. As can be seen from the sketches its distinctness varies according to the length and stoutness of the bill. In the case of *rufopicta* there is a slight compression towards the tip but the bill is thick, and this might not be recognised as homologous with that of the other species. There is no appreciable narrowing in the case of *caerulescens* but *perreini* does possess a bill that narrows near the tip and so this characteristic is only partially useful. It might be argued that *perreini* links *caerulescens* with the Fire-finches via *rufopicta*, the difference being no greater than that already displayed within the genus. With the exception of *senegala* the bills of *Lagonosticta* tend to be longer and more prominent when compared with the shorter and thicker bills of *Elstrida*.

3. White Spots.

The possession of small white spots on some of the feathers of the sides is a characteristic which requires more careful examination. At one time it led to the inclusion in *Lagonosticta* of birds such as the Twinspots (*Hypargos* spp.) since these have flanks heavily spotted with white.

The most conspicuous plumage characteristic of *caerulescens* and *perreini* is patch of colour formed by the red rump and upper and under tail-coverts. In the case of *caerulescens* there is in addition an area of white spots bordering these coverts along the rear edge of the flanks. Because of these spots *caerulescens* was placed in *Lagonosticta* while *perreini* was left in *Estrilda*, but I am of the opinion that these are not homologous with the white spots of *Lagonosticta* and must be considered as part of the conspicuous colouration of the tail region of the former species.

If the possession of white spots on the plumage is to be used as a characteristic for defining *Lagonosticta* then the *position* of such spots must be emphasised.

Rubricata and the cock of *senegala* may be considered as typical in having a small group of white spots at either side of the lower breast just forward of the carpal joint of the closed wing when this is folded against the bird's side. In both these species the spots tend to be minute and in some cases are only noticeable when a dead specimen is closely examined.

The *senegala* hen has more numerous spots which are present over much of the breast but tend to be concentrated towards the sides. In *nigricollis*, *larvata*, *vinacea*, and *jamesoni* areas of small white spots are present as in *rubricata*, but they tend to be more numerous and to extend onto the forepart of the flanks. In *landanae* they tend to be fewer but larger and more conspicuous. In *nitidula* the spots are spread across the breast, and in *rufopicta* these take the form of tiny white terminal bars on the feathers of the breast. In *rara* the spots are absent but there is no doubt about its affinities, since in appearance and behaviour it is very close indeed to *rubricata*.

We may say then that in *Lagonosticta* most species possess a group of small white spots, sometimes very inconspicuous, which are centred at the sides of the breast near the carpal joint of the closed wing, but which may extend over the whole breast and foreflanks, or may be present as tiny white terminal bars on the feathers of this area.

The Australian Crimson Finch (*Poephila phaeton*) fits this description very well, being a red and brown bird with a head superficially similar to that of *rufopicta* and with a small group of white spots in just the right place. Its precise affinities are still uncertain.

4. Eye-Rim Colouration.

There is one characteristic which is relatively conspicuous in the Fire-finches and absent in most of the other waxbills and that is the possession of a distinctly coloured rim around the eye. This is formed by the eyelids and becomes faded and inconspicuous after death. If it is not recorded at the time that the bird is collected it cannot be discovered from the preserved skin. This fugitive tendency is probably the reason why it has not been adequately recorded. I have found it mentioned so far in only one work—Chapin's "Birds of the Belgium Congo"—and very few museum skins bear any reference to it. Yet in life it is very conspicuous in species such as *senegala* where that of the cock is bright yellow against red plumage; and in the cock of *vinacea* where it is pale yellow on black.

There are sexual differences of colour in some species, and there appear to be age differences, those of young birds being darker or different from those of adults. I have no records as yet to show whether there is any variation due to physiological causes such as the development or recession of the gonads during the breeding cycle.

I have been able to establish the presence of a coloured eye-rim in every species except *nitidula*. In the list that follows I have indicated whether the record was based on the examination of a live bird, or from the label of a skin in the British Museum (Natural History) in which case I have quoted the register number, or from published sources.

<i>senegala</i>	♂ Bright yellow (live). ♀ Silvery-grey (live).
<i>rubricata</i>	♂ ♀ almost white (live). pink (Chapin).
<i>landanae</i>	♂ ♀ pale rose-madder (1909.8.5.166: 1910.5.6.1402,-3,-5). ♂ greenish-grey (1910.5.6.1404).
<i>jamesoni</i>	♂ pinkish-white (1932.5.10.1355).
<i>rara</i>	♂ light pink (live). ♀ grey (1923.8.7.2608). Imm. ♂ yellowish-grey (1923.8.7.2054) yellowish (1923.8.7.2069). ♂ ♀ light grey (Chapin).

<i>rufopicta</i>	♂ silvery-grey (live). ♂ ♀ light bluish-grey (Chapin).
<i>vinacea</i>	♂ pale yellow (live). ♀ grey (live).
<i>nigricollis</i>	♂ bluish-grey (1916.12.1.690)
	♂ light blue (1916.12.1.689).
<i>larvata</i>	♂ ♀ greyish-blue (Chapin).
	♀ light blue (1916.12.1.729).

This characteristic is not a wholly exclusive one. The Violet eared Waxbill (*G. granatina*) possesses a coloured eye-rim, as does the Crimson Finch, and the genus *Pirenestes* may also do so; but taken in conjunction with the other characteristics mentioned it may serve to define more clearly, and to isolate, *Lagonosticta*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

I should like to thank the trustees of the British Museum (Natural History) for permission to examine the specimens in the collection, and to refer to these.

References:—

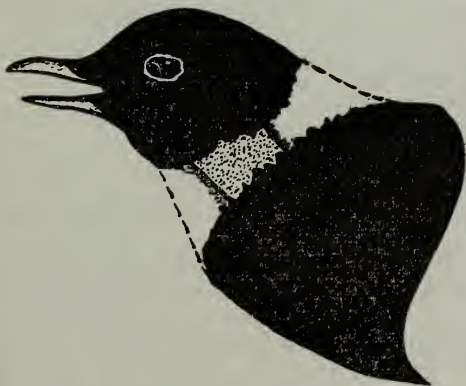
- Chapin, J. P. (1954) *Birds of the Belgium Congo*. 4: 517–32. New York.
 Harrison, C. J. O. (1956) Some fire-finches and their behaviour. *Avic. Mag.* 62: 128–41.

A Male Blackbird with a ‘Disfigured’ Plumage

by IAN D. WOODWARD

Received 6th October, 1959

From about the middle of April, 1958, and subsequently until the beginning of September, an adult ♂ Blackbird *Turdus merula* Linnaeus with a peculiar plumage ‘disfigurement’ was noted at Barnard Castle, Co. Durham, almost every day during this period. The ‘disfigurement’ was in the region around the bird’s hind neck and throat (see figure below), giving the bird a shaven appearance. The area containing no feathers was c. $\frac{1}{2}$.5in. – 1in. in height. I might add, that this ‘collar’ was



in no way similar to the bare patches on the necks of females following sexual behaviour.